
The Career Pathways Transition to Employment Project: Development, Outcomes and Future Directions

This article describes a recent project undertaken to support students with disabilities in their transition from higher education into employment.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, more and more students with disabilities are accessing and succeeding in higher education (AHEAD, 2015), in part through the development of various pathways to education and the provision of a variety of supports within the educational context.

However, embarking on the transition from higher education into employment can be fraught with challenges for these students (Fichten et al, 2012). The employment levels of individuals with disabilities have remained significantly lower than their nondisabled peers (ESRI, 2010). In 2010, the employment rate for individuals with disabilities was low at twenty eight percent (Watson, Kingston & McGinnity, 2012). The National Disability Authority (2014) maintains that disabled people are two and a half times less likely to be in work than non-disabled people. As a result of the challenges experienced by people with disabilities, it is timely that the Irish Government published the 'Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024' in October 2015. This sets out a ten-year approach to ensuring that people with disabilities, who could and want to work, are supported and enabled to do so. One of the actions from phase one of the strategy emphasises the need to support students/graduates with disabilities in higher education to develop work related skills and experiences to support them in their transition from college to employment.

In order to go beyond the policy and listen to the student's voice, research was conducted by the Discipline of Occupational Therapy in Trinity College Dublin, with students and graduates with disabilities (Nolan and Gleeson, In press). This explored their experiences, perspectives and concerns in relation to their transition from college to employment.

Findings from this research, highlighted specific perspectives relating to the need to gather and build work-related experiences and personal strategies while in college. Furthermore, managing and negotiating disclosure and reasonable accommodations in the workplace was a palpable concern for the students and graduates. These perspectives identified particular needs amongst students with disabilities and hence the establishment of the Career Pathways Project. This article will outline the development of the Career Pathways approach, the outcomes of the project thus far, and the future directions for supporting students in the transition to employment within Trinity.

Development of the Career Pathways approach

Career Pathways was established to be a flexible and individually tailored transition service for students with disabilities, which they could access throughout their time in college and into employment. The project was a collaboration between the Careers Advisory Service and Disability Service in Trinity College Dublin. The aim was to

develop a streamlined process to support students with disabilities in the transition to the workplace.

An application was made to the [Genio Trust](#) for funding, based upon the project objectives outlined below:

1. To develop a clearly delineated individual process comprising three stages, with access to individually tailored resources. <https://www.tcd.ie/disability/career/Pathways/3stages.php>
2. To develop an e-portfolio system where students can track and log their work-related experiences and engagement with resources available.
3. To develop a series of peer workshops, involving graduates with disabilities to act as mentors to current students.
4. To connect students to employers through employment events.
5. To provide workshops to Careers and Disability Service staff with the Higher Education Institutes involved in the project.

A Careers Adviser was recruited, with experience within the higher education and further education sector, but also with specific expertise and knowledge of the disability area, to act as Careers lead on the project. A key role was identified for occupational therapy in enabling students' engagement in work-related occupations, drawing upon the experience of the [Unilink Service](#), and two senior Occupational Therapists were seconded to the project.

Occupational Therapy has a long history supporting individuals to engage in work, across many settings and contexts. The philosophy of the approach was based upon recovery principles (Deegan, 1998; Anthony, 1993), as recommended in A Vision for Change, the Report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy (2006). This placed focus upon empowering the student to develop personal self-management skills and strategies to manage his/ her role as a worker. Additionally, it focuses upon instilling hope and enabling the student to advocate for themselves, and promotes social inclusion by increasing diversity within various work environments.

Outline of the Career Pathways approach

The Career Pathways Process

The process involves three stages; exploring your career, building your career, and launching your career. The process within the approach is flexible and students can access at any point in their student journey. When a student initially comes to Career Pathways, he/she identifies areas of concern and difficulty through a self-report profile; entitled the Career Pathways Profile, which is based upon the Person Environment Occupation Model (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby & Letts, 1996) and goals are set collaboratively with the student to work upon. Depending on the goals of the students, they can choose to access individual meetings with Disability and Careers Service staff; monthly workshops jointly led by staff and graduates with disabilities; employer events; annual boot camps or online resources via a specially designed e-portfolio system, using the [Pebblepad system](#). The student has access to these resources to focus upon areas such as CV development, interview preparation, refining reasonable accommodations for the workplace, disclosure, and managing health and well-being in the workplace. As students engage, they are asked for feedback via questionnaires and verbal feedback, in order to ensure and explore if the needs of the students are being addressed and also to make adjustments to ensure quality of project and service delivery.

Outcomes of the project

Project Statistics

- 134 students or graduates with disabilities have availed of Career Pathways over the past two years.
- Over 500 individual meetings have taken place between students and Occupational Therapists / Careers Advisers.
- 74 students have been set up on the ePortfolio system, developed within the project to allow students to log their work related experiences and engagement with resources available.
- 45 students have attended monthly workshops and a three day Career Pathways Boot Camp delivered, by the OTs, Careers Advisers, peers, and employers.
- 26 Disability and Careers Service staff from four HEIs within the Dublin area have attended training workshops on supporting students with disabilities transition to employment.
- 16 Employers have connected with Career Pathways, with three large multi-national employers hosting events in their Head Offices.

Student Feedback

I found the mock interviews extremely helpful. The fact the service is available to graduates for one year after graduation is really brilliant. The service has given me so much help, support and encouragement – I have really grown in confidence through it.

Through a series of workshops and one-to-one sessions, I've been able to work on my CV and interview presentation, giving me the confidence that I need to excel in the professional world.

.... communicating with peers who are in similar situations, a sense of acceptance and openness surrounding the boot camp.

A thank you to you all for the very useful, helpful and informative Bootcamp. The workshops were well run and organised. Speakers from outside was also a great idea. The space for working was great to have. I appreciate the opportunity to connect and talk with other students in a relaxed, easy atmosphere e.g. over lunch.

Future directions

Career Pathways has been successful in supporting students and graduates in their transition from college into employment. An exciting aspect of the project moving forward, is the development of the Disability Service Student Ambassador Programme. This programme moves beyond the delivery of services to students, to collaboratively work with students to strengthen, develop and deliver services to students availing of the Disability and Careers Services. The Ambassador Programme seeks to offer students opportunities to develop work related skills through monthly training and leadership workshops and to execute these at Disability Service events. The Career Pathways project has realigned the focus upon service provision within Trinity to not only support the academic development of students, but also the personal and professional development, enriching and enhancing their prospects for the future.

This project wouldn't have been possible without the vision, commitment and drive of the Disability Service Director, Declan Treanor, the Director of the Careers Advisory Service, Mr Sean Gannon and The Unilink Service Director, Dr Clodagh Nolan. We would also like to thank the Genio Trust for funding the project.

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Kieran is a Senior Occupational Therapist within the Disability Service in Trinity College Dublin and for the last two years has been a project officer within the Genio Funded project, Career Pathways. Kieran is also the lead on phase three activities within the Disability Service strategic plan, which focus upon the student's transition to employment. Kieran holds a Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy and is currently undertaking PhD Research into the development and efficacy of an occupation-focused self-management programme.



Claire Gleeson

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Claire qualified with a Bachelor of Science Honours Degree in Occupational Therapy from Trinity College Dublin. Claire has worked within the field of Mental Health and Autism, and has worked across all educational levels, from primary school to university. Claire currently works as a Senior Occupational Therapist in the Disability Service in Trinity. Claire also holds a Master's of Science by Research from Trinity and a Post Graduate Advanced Certificate in Education from Queens University, Belfast, both specialising in the area of Autism Spectrum Disorders. Claire is currently undertaking a PhD which explores the lived experiences of women with Autism in their transition out of college. Claire is the Chairperson of the Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland Mental Health Advisory Group, and a Board Member of the ASPIRE, she also sits on the Pieta House Autism and Mental Health Research Steering Committee.



Eileen Daly

Disability Rights Activist

Eileen lives and works in Dublin. A graduate of UCD, Eileen is a career guidance practitioner and career coach and a passionate disability rights activist. She currently works with the Rehab Group in a partnership service with the City of Dublin Education & Training Board supporting people with disabilities in Further Education. She has also worked in Trinity College on the Career Pathways project which supported students & graduates with disabilities to prepare for the transition to the workplace. She is chairperson of Greater Dublin Independent Living. GDIL is part of the wider independent living movement in Ireland and it aims to ensure that all people with disabilities have the right to experience independent living and have maximum choice and control in their lives.

